

## IN THE NATION

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# The Saudi Link

**T**he Saudi Arabian Government has denied having had anything to do with the American arms sales to Iran. But that doesn't seem to square with the discovery by the F.B.I. of Saudi links to a suspect Swiss bank account that may have been used in the complicated transaction; and the denial is taken with a large grain of salt by some Middle East experts who are familiar with Saudi affairs and attitudes.

They say it was only to be expected that Adnan Khashoggi, the Saudi arms peddler who helped arrange the U.S.-Iran deal, insisted to Barbara Walters on national television that the Saudis had not been involved. In their view, his statement provided only another layer of "cover" for a Saudi royal family that could have stopped but instead gave the green light to the arms sale.

Mr. Khashoggi has conceded that he played a middleman's part in bringing together the parties to the sale, and helping to arrange the financing. The history of his operations, the Middle East analysts say, confirms that he acts only with the approval of King Fahd or other highly placed members of the Saudi ruling family; and that he protects these royal connections at all costs.

In that light, it is all but inconceivable that Mr. Khashoggi, without approval from Riyadh, would have taken part in a matter of such importance as the U.S. arms sale to a revolutionary Iranian Government whose fierce Islamic fundamentalism seems a major threat to the conservative Saudi Arabian regime.

But why would the Saudis want to assist in an arms deal that on its face seems to lend assistance to that Iranian Government? The experts say the Saudis would have thought they had good reasons:

- Traditionally, the oil-rich but militarily insecure Saudi royal family has used its wealth to buy "insurance policies" against those who threaten its regime — other Middle

East governments, terrorists, revolutionary groups, etc. Thus, while Saudi Arabia has helped finance Iraq in its war against Iran, it also has sought to keep open a channel to Iran, as an "insurance policy" against an Iranian victory.

In October, for instance, Sheikh Yamani, the Saudi oil minister, was dismissed. He was an advocate of overproduction of plentiful Saudi oil as a means of keeping world prices down; but he was sacrificed, the experts say, when the Saudi Government responded to heavy pressures from other oil producers by cutting production and letting prices rise — an accommodation to the demands of Iran, in particular.

- Traditionally, too, the royal family and the Saudi Government have sought to maintain close relations with the United States. In their view, Washington — especially the C.I.A., which among Saudis enjoys an exaggerated reputation for power — would be the ultimate protector of the regime against outside pressures or internal revolution.

- As Iranian advantages in manpower and resources began to make an Iraqi defeat seem more likely, the necessity increased for the Saudis — in their tradition of seeking insurance against any potential threat — to hedge their bets on the Middle Eastern war. One strong reason for their desire not to make a mortal enemy of Ayatollah Khomeini and his Government is the presence in the eastern area of Saudi Arabia of a quarter-million Shiite Moslems, whose living standard is somewhat lower than that of the rest of the nation. The Shiites are considered particularly susceptible to the revolutionary and fundamentalist preachings of the Ayatollah.

Thus, in the view of the Middle East experts who discussed the matter, the Saudis had their own reasons for giving their tacit approval when Mr. Khashoggi approached them with the news that Washington wanted to sell arms (via Israel) to the threatening regime in Teheran. They would be lending their assistance to, and bolstering their position with, their assumed protectors in the United States. They would get credit in Iran for helping provide some badly needed weapons — or at least for not blocking the sale.

They could have blocked it by calling off Mr. Khashoggi and leaking the story for publication; but to have done so might have impaired their relations with the Reagan Administration — another reason for letting the arms sale go forward with Saudi blessing.

There is, of course, no "smoking gun" in this line of reasoning; but to those familiar with the indirection of politics and diplomacy in the Middle East, none is needed. □